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AUTHOR	Walsh, Julia
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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the various services provided through the federally funded TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) program at Kankakee Community College (KCC) (Illinois). The program helps simplify the educational process for low-income, first-generation and disabled college students. The goal is to ensure qualified students get the support they need to complete their educational goals at KCC--which could include earning an associate degree--and smoothly transfer to a college or university to complete baccalaureate degrees. The program provides the mentor/counselor/friend to guide, encourage and inform students at all stages in their college careers. Some of the most effective practices of the TRIO SSS program include helping students gain career clarity; providing intensive academic planning; monitoring academic progress; developing comprehensive transfer services; offering learning enhancements; and recognizing achievements and resources that contribute to student success. More than 80% of TRIO students persist in their academic goals each year. The graduation rates, transfer rates, and GPA levels of these students far exceed those of similar students who are not enrolled in the TRIO program as documented in annual program evaluations. (JA)

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UNIQUE AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR TRIO STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES PROGRAMS

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Julia Walsh
Director of TRIO Student Support Services
P.O. Box 888, River Rd.
Kankakee, IL 60901
jwalsh@kcc.cc.il.us
Phone: (815) 933-0359
Fax: (815) 933-0217
Kankakee Community College

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Brief Description

Julia Walsh is the Director of TRIO Student Support Services for Kankakee Community College in Kankakee, Ill. She is a graduate of Kankakee Community College and Olivet Nazarene University in Bourbonnais, Ill. and holds a master's degree in Business Administration from Olivet Nazarene University. Ms. Walsh serves on the Kankakee Community College Enrollment Management, Improved Student Learning process, Long-Term Strategic Planning, and TRIO Data Collection committees. The TRIO SSS program has been a model of exemplary student retention practices at the college.

Abstract

Completing a college degree can be one of the most rewarding experiences in life. Studies show that as the amount of education beyond high school increases, so do the positive life experiences. Individuals with higher education earn more money, have improved self-esteem, serve as positive role models for youth and are more culturally and socially developed.

The federally funded TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) program at Kankakee Community College (KCC) helps simplify the educational process for either low-income, first-generation or disabled college students. The goal is to ensure qualified students get the support they need to complete their educational goals at KCC-which could include earning an associate degree-and smoothly transfer to a college or university to complete baccalaureate degrees.

Many times the educational process can be confusing. TRIO Student Support Services provides the mentor/counselor/friend to guide, encourage and inform students at all stages in their college careers. Some of the most effective practices of the TRIO SSS program include helping students gain career clarity; providing intensive academic planning; monitoring academic progress; developing comprehensive transfer services; offering learning enhancements; and recognizing achievements and resources that contribute to student success.

These unique services provided through the TRIO Student Support Services program at Kankakee Community College support students through the college experience and into their chosen profession.

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As scientists worked diligently to prepare for the unveiling of *Sue*—the prehistoric *Tyrannosaurus*—TRIO professionals worked diligently at campuses across the U.S. to prepare students for success. Our efforts may go unnoticed in the public eye, but we continually and patiently unearth the debris that buries the treasures of talent and perseverance within our students.

The typical TRIO student comes from a family environment that may not understand the navigational skills required to succeed in the world of academia. Entering an institution of higher education is like visiting a foreign country for many. The academic jargon used so freely among educators requires decoding skills for a student who may not understand the difference between an associate's degree and a bachelor's degree or the difference between a transfer credit hour and a non-transfer credit hour. These barriers and many others discourage any first generation student from entering our doors. Some students have the added challenges of financial limitations and/or academic/physical disabilities.

As TRIO colleagues, we are charged with the duty of clearing away those barriers by empowering our students to forge ahead in this process we call higher education. What better way to do that than to equip our teams with strategic resources? Sharing effective practices of successful TRIO programs is one way of adding to our repertoire of strategies.

Keeping the end in mind

One of the most effective practices of the TRIO Student Support Services program is helping students gain career clarity. This may sound like common sense, but identifying career goals can be a very difficult process for undecided students. Keeping

the end result in mind gives students the motivation to persist from semester to semester and helps them appreciate the relevance of education in their plans. A student who is uncertain about career goals struggles with the ability to persist in a class that may seem irrelevant. This indecision can result in dramatic negative effects on a student's ability to stay in school and complete a bachelor's degree.

A way to foster career clarity is to form student social committees that are defined by major of study. Students who want to become social workers, business people, health professionals, artists, etc. get together every other month to discuss current trends in the profession and to identify ways in which they can create a professional network even in their freshman or sophomore years of college. Some students attend professional workshops to learn more about the demands and expectations of the profession. This process should begin early in students' academic careers so they can crystallize their concept of a particular profession.

Job shadowing and/or internship opportunities are also identified and made available for our students as early as their first semester. Three of our students who wanted to pursue careers in social work attended a *Diversity* workshop designed for professional social workers in the area. Two of these students returned with a renewed enthusiasm and an excitement to continue in the careers and academic goals. The other student returned with the realization that she had made an inappropriate career choice. Still a freshman, she was able to explore other career options. Now she approaches her new career choice with greater confidence and security. The process of evaluating and identifying career choices helps students maintain momentum throughout their college education. It also can prevent students from making unsuitable career choices. If they

understand the profession early in their academic career, then they have time to reconsider without paying the high price of lost credit hours and wasted time.

Intensive academic planning

Helping students achieve the end result means we support them through the process. Appropriate courses and course load levels are carefully regulated to ensure success. These selections not only satisfy the requirements of the associate's degrees but also of the bachelor's degrees at the chosen transfer sites. For example, when the student is transferring to a four-year institution that requires a finite math course, plans for that requirement are made at the community college level. This contributes to efficiency of student time and money.

Maintaining the integrity of a GPA

The academic progress of each student is monitored each semester. If a grade of D or F is earned in a course at midterm, a TRIO staff meets with the student to develop strategies to improve the grade(s). Strategies include securing a tutor or a study partner, initiating communication with instructors, or withdrawing from the class.

It is worthy to note that many students rarely communicate with their instructors until it is too late to recover a poor grade. Facilitating communication among students and instructors fosters healthy working relationships, which has implications for the work environment. Together they come to mutually agreeable terms about success strategies for that class. Sometimes initiating that communication is all it takes for students to gain confidence to persist. Students then are required to meet every two weeks with their TRIO adviser to review their progress until the end of the semester.

Comprehensive transfer services

Comprehensive transfer services are an integral part of the TRIO SSS program. Group college visits with a career emphasis are scheduled to add relevance to this student experience.

During a scheduled visit to Columbia College in Chicago, students toured the graphic design, interactive multimedia, and photography programs. Students also had an opportunity to meet with academic advisers for preliminary transcript articulation sessions. Visits to the Financial Aid and TRIO offices, residence halls, dining halls and admission centers are also scheduled into college tours. After the Columbia College visit, students toured the *Chicago Tribune* building to gain exposure to newspaper journalism. Students were able to identify important career elements like working conditions, corporate values and philosophy.

Sometimes college visits are scheduled for individual students because group visits may not accommodate academic or work schedules. When students visit colleges, they evaluate the environment according to their needs. Students comment about the size of the residence halls and classrooms, the friendliness of staff, the cleanliness of the facility, and the importance of healthy GPAs.

To finalize the transfer process, the TRIO staff assists students with the completion of the application for admission to various schools, the electronic submission of financial aid applications, the forwarding of college and financial aid transcripts to the transfer site, and the scheduling of appointments with admissions and TRIO counselors. Follow-up phone, mail or e-mail surveys are conducted for each graduate or transfer TRIO student to identify areas for improving transfer services. More than 50 students

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surveyed in the past three years stated that the comprehensive transfer services provided by TRIO were invaluable. Student comments regarding these services include, "This program gave me a lot of confidence and helped me stay focused on my goals" and "Because of the help I received in TRIO, I do not feel overwhelmed at my four-year school." Students are comfortable and prepared with the transfer process and transition smoothly as a result of this complete service.

Reducing obstacles and enhancing learning

Other effective support services include offering TRIO students workshops designed to enhance learning experiences or to reduce financial obstacles to academic success. It is an easy process to identify workshops and experiences that **seem** appropriate and effective, but until student needs and obstacles are defined, these efforts can be pointless.

Educational professionals know students come to college and are required to complete assignments using word processors, spreadsheets or databases. This can create a fundamental barrier to academic success for some. Most students in TRIO programs have not been exposed to even middle-level skills or state-of-the-art technology. In fact, 25 percent of TRIO students never have used a word processor; 66 percent never have used spreadsheets; 69 percent never have used databases; and 87 percent never have used electronic mail (Council for Opportunity in Education, 1998 Annual Report). This creates huge disparities in the familiarity and understanding students have of technology.

This discovery and the knowledge that many students enrolled in the program did not have access to computers outside of the classroom motivated our staff to develop computer skill-building workshops. At the beginning of each year, the TRIO SSS

program offers its students a workshop entitled *How To Format Writing Assignments Using Word.* This helps students learn the most efficient and effective way to format writing assignments. Topics like appropriate spacing; parenthetical citations; bolding; headings; footnotes and endnotes; cover sheets; italicizing; and creating a works cited page are included in this presentation.

Because 87 percent of TRIO students have never used electronic mail, the *You Have Mail* Internet workshop was developed. Students not only learn how to set up a personal e-mail account so they can stay in touch with their college friends at campuses across the U.S. but also learn the ins and outs of using the Internet. Students learn how to search for valuable information on the World Wide Web to use in research papers and how to include them in bibliographies using the APA format for writing papers. "I have more confidence about computers than I did before this workshop," said one student after attending *You Have Mail.*

These workshops give students a working knowledge of basic computer skills as they approach English, math or business courses. To support this knowledge, the TRIO SSS office houses two computers and a color printer for student use. This provides the out-of-the-classroom computer access for students to complete assignments and e-mail communication.

To ease financial barriers to success that many TRIO students experience, a writing instructor presents the *Writing Your personal Essay for Scholarships* workshop each year. Students are given a model or prototype to follow when developing personal essays and scholarship applications. Sample award-winning essays are used for reference.

Approximately, 81 percent of the students who have attended this workshop over the past three years have received scholarship awards totaling more than $30,000.

Additionally, TRIO staff assists low-income students with the financial aid application process, which has allowed these students—more than 100 per year—access to nearly $300,000 in assistance per year.

Recognizing achievements and resources

National TRIO Day is celebrated each year with our *Standing Ovation Ceremony*. This special event honors students for exemplary academic achievements and exceptional program participation. More than 30 students each year have been recognized for achieving either a 3.0 or 4.0 GPA while enrolled either full time or part-time. Some students are recognized for steady increases in their GPAs.

Staff and faculty members named by the student honorees as instrumental in helping them achieve academic and personal fulfillment also are honored. Each year, more than 20 faculty and staff members have been nominated to acknowledge their support, encouragement and guidance they give to students. "As an educator, it is always a good feeling to be recognized by students," said one honoree. "It shows that they appreciate you as much as you appreciate them."

Other comments from honored staff and faculty have included "I felt really honored that a student feels my input has helped," and "The TRIO students were made to feel PROUD of their efforts, and they should be."

The ceremony includes guest speakers, entertainment by talented TRIO students, dinner, and an awards presentation. The annual ritual fosters a sense of pride and

community among students and staff and promotes an institutional climate of support for TRIO students.

Residual benefits to the campus and TRIO students

These efforts may not be televised across America, but our campuses and students enjoy many residual benefits. By providing effective services like these to participants, TRIO students become integrated into campus life both in and out of the classroom. Some of them become student ambassadors, many work on campus in Computer Services, science and art labs, and the Office of Admissions and Registration. Other students assume leadership roles in Phi Theta Kappa and the Student Advisory Council, and some serve as supplemental instructors and tutors. Whether or not these services are the reason for our success is uncertain. It is clear that these features are extremely important elements of the program. More than 80% of TRIO students persist in their academic goals each year. The graduation rates, transfer rates, and GPA levels of these students far exceed those of similar students who are not enrolled in the TRIO program as documented in annual program evaluations.

As TRIO professionals, we enjoy the rewards of knowing that supporting students through the college experience and into their chosen profession helps free them from financial, academic and professional constraints for the rest of their lives. Working in a profession that affects the citizenry of our society in this way is truly satisfying.